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Honors Distinction Project

26 April 2013

Examining the Examiners: An Analysis of “Staring at the Sun”

Eight dancers, under whirring projectors and blazing stage lights, stand and look at the people sitting and looking at them. In reality, they are all in the Experiential Movement and Media Arts (EMMA) Lab, but the audience and the dancers have an unspoken agreement to believe that the dancers are outside, in another time, in another world. “Staring at the Sun” is a twenty-minute long intermediated dance performance I choreographed with Quentin Burley. It uses video projections on three large screens around the live dancers. The piece has a natural setting and a shifting relationship between the audience and the performers. Our main (and most difficult) task in creating the piece was to use the video projections and the live dance to support one another and not overwhelm the audience with stimuli. Within that overarching goal, we explored the ideas of audience interaction and how people look at beauty. The creation of this Honors Distinction project enabled us to learn about ourselves as artists and about “Staring at the Sun” as a piece with its own life and characteristics.

All of the videos help to create an alternate universe for the dancers by giving the dance a setting or context. They create an expansive environment by wrapping around three sides of the stage and seemingly past the room into the space beyond. This video setting is supported by the costumes and the movement vocabulary to create identities for the dancers who are part of some natural tribe. The commitment to creating one distinct world is one of the major strengths of the project. The dancers exist within one environment instead of allowing the endless possibilities of

different video settings to confuse the environment. This clear setting is made as believable and natural as possible by avoiding projector shadows and filling entire screens with videos. An unexpected result of the video setting is that it makes the piece more accessible to those who are not very familiar with modern dance. I heard from several audience members that they enjoy the pieces produced in the EMMA Lab that use video projections because they provide a context for the movement. At the simplest level of “Staring at the Sun,” the videos help the audience understand that the dancers are in a far-away natural world, which may be enough for a new audience member to feel as though he or she “gets it.” The videos could be seen simply as pretty backdrops that set the dancers’ stage; however, they also give more specific information about the piece for those willing to dig a little bit deeper.

In each section, the video supports an aspect of the choreography or provides more information relevant to the live dancing. By allowing the video to comment in different manners, we made a relationship between the video and live dance in which they support one another without having the live dance simply relive the action in the video. My favorite example of this relationship is the giant eyeballs that appear on the screens during our duet. These enormous eyes alert the audience that they should note the strong, pointed focus of the live dancers. The gradual zoom of the video in another section clues the audience in to the spatial pattern of the choreography, which is slowing receding and diminishing backwards. The panning shots during the trio also accentuate the section’s spatial pattern because they exaggerate the circle walked by the live dancers. A video of a wall appears as the dancers trace the edge of the stage and reference the metaphorical fourth wall between audience and performer. Ellen’s majestic virtual presence draws the audience’s attention to her live body, which is also set apart from the rest of

the dancers' bodies because it is moving very differently. All of these examples enhance one aspect of the choreography and create a cohesive relationship between the video and live dance.

Although we give the audience more information with the videos, sometimes the main idea of a section ended up being different than the idea reinforced by the video. The warp section, in which the video slowly zooms to a small point while the dancers move backwards into a clump, is supported by the video in terms of the spatial patterns. When we started making the section, the spatial patterns were the most important aspect of the choreography, so this relationship was appropriate. However, once we placed the section into the context of the entire piece, the spatial relationships became less important than the dancers' confrontation of the audience with a direct stare. So, the audience is being told by the video to notice the diminishing space while our bodies tell them that they should feel confronted. These differing priorities are not necessarily a problem since they do not counter one another—in fact, they may even be related as the dancers threaten the audience to get away from their diminishing territory—but they create more facets, which could dilute the main goal of the section.

So far, I have referenced how the video supports the movement, but in fact, the video and the live dance actually take turns being the actor of most importance in each section. Some sections were choreographed first while other sections were choreographed after there was video to inspire the movement. We intentionally mixed up the order of creation because it encouraged us to have more than one type of relationship between the video and live dance. Generally, if we made the video first, the video has a higher rate of change (and therefore, demands more of the audience's attention), and if we choreographed the section first, the video is simpler (and therefore, the audience can focus more on the dancing). This relationship allows the audience to take in both aspects, recognize that either the video or the dancers are following a predictable

pattern, and then focus on the other feature (the one with a higher rate of change) without becoming overwhelmed with stimuli. This back-and-forth tactic is one of the ways that we accomplish our goal of making the video and the live dance symbiotic.

Our other major goal—dancer acknowledgement of the audience—also remained important for us throughout the process. At first, we wanted to create a dance that travelled the entire continuum from audience observation to full participation. We quickly realized that we were not interested in an interactive piece and moved away from a participatory experience while maintaining our interest in audience engagement with the dancers. The small size of the EMMA Lab can create an intimacy between the audience and the dancers, so we wanted to make intimate, performative detail one of the project's strengths instead of an almost-forgotten aspect tacked on at the end. However well coached, the eye-ography only really appeared during the last month of rehearsals. The tendency to prioritize practicing gross motor movement over performative intention and the lack of an audience in rehearsals made it extremely difficult to see the seeing before we got to the end of the process. However, we still came close to our initial goal by creating a clear, vibrant setting for the dancers and acknowledging the presence of the audience just outside of that setting. The final result is not an environment that fully includes the audience, but it is one that gives the audience the knowledge that their presence is affecting the dancers' world. Even though we chopped off the audience-participation end of the spectrum, the dancers perform with varying levels of audience acknowledgement. In one section, the dancers coyly look at people and then look away. In another section, they try to get the audience's attention with their extreme physical dynamics instead of their eyes. In another, they switch between a distant gaze and a confrontational stare at the audience. And finally, the dancers fully ignore the audience and acknowledge the separation by tracing the border between them. The

specific and varying focus within and outside of the stage space reinforces the idea that the dancers occupy a different world than the audience.

This acknowledgement of the audience merged with our lyrical movement vocabulary to inspire the topic of looking at beauty. This idea functioned as a motif rather than a theme in the piece because it is not a complete statement; it is a recurring concept that is presented in different ways. One way we incorporated the idea of looking at beauty is by asking whether people always choose to look at the most beautiful entity. In the duet, we take turns having one dancer perform picturesque movement while the other dancer looks at the audience as though demanding their attention. We also try to manipulate how the audience feels about looking at beauty by keeping the beautiful movement present throughout the piece but changing the invitation to observe it. When the dance begins, the dancers invite the audience to look at them, but throughout the piece, the invitation turns into a challenge. Another iteration of this motif is exploring what effort, grit, or even ugliness can be concealed by beauty. In the chatter section, Ellen's face effortlessly fills a screen with majesty while her live body strains to create shapes. Although this underlying un-beauty inspired much of the movement throughout the piece, it was not choreographed specifically enough to be easily legible to an audience member. The chatter section is an example of how the idea of discord was intended but not fully executed within the whole performance.

When we realized that everything in the piece was harmonious and beautiful, we made the chatter section in order to create some sort of dissonance within the dancers' beautiful world. We attempted to add some grit with jittery, weird movement for the dancers and by pulling the audience's attention in too many places. We experienced our biggest miscommunication between choreographers in our attempt to strain the audience's attention. Quentin thought that the audience would be feeling torn whether to look at the virtual Ellen or the live Ellen. I thought

that the audience would be deciding whether to pay attention to the set of Ellens or the crazy movement of all the other dancers. Once we realized that there was a miscommunication, we decided upon the latter, however, even with the clarity, I am not sure if this idea of discord belongs in “Staring at the Sun.”

If I could revisit the piece, I would take a closer look at how the pull of attention in the chatter section fits into the larger piece. It works in that it forces the audience members to use their focus in a different way, just as the dancers change their focus throughout the piece. However, its intention is to create a feeling of cacophony within our environment, while in the rest of the piece, there is harmony within the stage space, and the discord comes from the border with the audience. In actuality, the chatter section was busy, but not completely overwhelming. If we had really wanted to execute our idea, we could have made it even more overwhelming by filling all the screens with different videos of Ellen and creating even faster movements so that it was extremely different from the rest of the piece. This choice would have drastically changed the overall arc of the piece, but would have gone more fully in the direction that we claim to have gone. The fact that we stayed in an only moderately busy place made the section different but still part of the larger whole. Another way to make the chatter section have a clearer voice that supports the overall piece would be to make it a solo for Ellen in which the audience’s attention is not pulled around many ideas but only between the beautiful virtual Ellen and the straining live Ellen. In this hypothetical iteration, Ellen’s live struggle would be even more exaggerated to make the motif of looking at beauty clearer within the piece. Our goal for the chatter section does not really fit into the larger whole, but our unfulfilled execution of the idea does.

The chatter section does not make a significant dent in the harmonious, clear setting of the whole piece, so the dancers become more than bodies; they become characters. Race and sex are two character traits that we had to consider while casting our project, even though if it were possible, neither would influence our project and we could simply choose dancers based on their technique, artistry, and personality. We knew that our piece would not intentionally comment on race or sex, but we also knew that anytime a body is placed onstage it represents its features, and therefore, the implications must be considered. Our cast includes seven females and one male, all of whom have light-colored skin. The homogenous nature of our cast's skin color is not a negative element in this piece because the setting is isolated in time and space, which means that the physical attributes of the characters could be determined by their common environment and unaffected by different races and cultures. The topic of sex was more problematic than race in our piece because the beautiful movement and the videos of women in dresses initially made the piece a commentary about the nature of women, which we were not interested in making and which also made Quentin a significant character as the only man.

We probably should have cast another man in the piece, but instead of including a man who does not fit the movement standards of the piece, we decided to make Quentin and the women as similar as possible in terms of movement quality and presence. At first, Quentin did not appear anywhere in the videos, and the absence of his digital presence exaggerated the separation already created by his sex, so we used a very close shot of his eyeball to make him virtually present in the piece. In order to more fully include his live body, we incorporated him into the group sections seemingly with the same arbitrariness as all the women. In reality, we made sure that he was not placed where he would seem to be more significant than any of the women; for example, we moved him from the front of the stage to the middle of the clump for

the very first section so that he is part of the group instead of an outsider or a leader. We also made sure that Quentin and I hold an equal power dynamic in the duet. One could argue that Quentin lifting me a few times put Quentin in power, but other less tangible factors make us equals. We move together in an un-gendered movement vocabulary for almost all of the choreographic shifts, we take turns leading one another around the stage spatially, our performative intensity is on the same level, and unison movement at the end solidifies our presence as one unit. In order to have the final product ignore the topic of sex, we had to pay close attention to it during the piece's creation process.

Although the final iteration of the piece had a unified vision, Quentin and I started the process with a general feeling and some specific images in mind. We were hoping to allow our initial creations to inform what our project was to become. This organic approach seemed appropriate since we were using prerecorded video that limited us to shooting almost all of the footage before the winter came. We were excited to see what we would naturally make and then exaggerate its present characteristics instead of imposing irrelevant external ideas onto the project. We also wanted to see what we would make together since the project was coming from both of us. These intentions were honorable and decided upon with care, but there were a few factors that made it difficult for us to objectively see the stage and screens until we were far along in the process.

Since we applied for funding for the project, we had several thousand well-articulated words about the project before we had any movement or video. This writing gave us an artistic direction, a timeline, and a very generous budget, but it also placed a solid wall of words in between my eyes and the piece that we were making. Instead of seeing what the movement and video actually suggested, I often saw what we said we were trying to accomplish. Having people

outside our process watch the piece and share their observations helped us learn whether people could see in our dance the same ideas that we were discussing. Unfortunately, we did not utilize this tactic until we were about halfway through the year, but now I know that if I am having trouble sensing what I want in contrast with what I have, I should simply ask. Answers to the question, “what do you see?” would have been very useful early in the process to help us determine what was working in terms of our goals.

Another aspect that made it difficult to gain an overarching sense of the piece was that both choreographers were also dancing in the piece. Instead of always being able to watch the piece, we were often practicing the piece alongside our dancers. Even when we did step out to watch the dancers, we could never see the full effect because we could not see ourselves dancing as part of the larger unit. We tried to solve this problem by taking turns practicing with the dancers and sitting out so that the choreographer watching was the only missing body. We also recorded many of the rehearsals with our video cameras so that we could watch them later. In retrospect, we should have opted not to perform in the work. It would have been much easier (and wiser) to always be able to see all the parts of the project each time we rehearsed in the EMMA Lab. However, I know that if I were to go back and do it again, I would choose to perform because I love it too much, and being a dancer in the piece did have its perks. The dancers respected us because we were in every boat with them, so they knew that we would not ask them to do anything that we were not willing to do ourselves. We danced alongside them at early morning rehearsals and outside at cold video shoots. The dancers also had us as physical models for movement execution and performance that remained from the first day of the choreography until the final performance. Dancing in the piece posed a huge challenge for the mind, but my heart was glad for the experience.

Although we knew that we would both be involved as choreographers and performers, Quentin and I did not immediately fall into our roles as full collaborators. When we first started the project, we each choreographed a small-group section, Quentin had a section with the entire group, and we each developed our own ideas for how video would be incorporated into those parts. We worked in this manner until October, when we realized that the sections felt disconnected from one another and that we were each allowing the other choreographer to be too precious with their parts. A change was needed, so we decided to move forward as co-choreographers of every aspect of the piece. Quentin started coming to “my” rehearsals for the trio, and I would speak up in “his” rehearsal for the quartet to suggest changes or movement. The group section that Quentin had been choreographing was eventually cut, and we made up all the remaining parts together. This team takeover also occurred in our video editing and placement; we made videos individually, but once we started working together on all the parts, we suggested edits for each others’ videos and would even sit down and make the cuts together. The shift to a sharing collaboration instead of a separate collaboration was awkward at times, but it made us more concerned about creating a unified piece. This style of collaborating is not the answer for everyone, but Quentin and I found that this way of working was a more efficient use of our different strengths.

Quentin and I share a similar aesthetic taste in dance, but the real power of our collaboration was in our differences. Outside of the actual piece, I took over almost all of the logistics. E-mails, scheduling, and planning all went through me. While I enjoyed having the lists and schedules keeping us on track, Quentin would not be deterred from veering off the plan if he saw a creative opportunity. Oftentimes, Quentin would come up with an idea for a video or section and then I would ask the questions that put the dream into reality (or not). We did a good

job of using both of our tendencies to decide when to take a risk and when to make practical changes. Artistically, Quentin has a great sense for the bigger picture. Several times throughout the process, he drew out line graphs of the piece's energy to communicate the relative pacing and feeling over the twenty minutes. He could sit and watch an entire run without making any notes and then have an idea to fill an energetic or thematic gap in the piece. I, on the other hand, had an eye for the details. Like a rehearsal director, I would watch a run and come away with lots of specific notes. The rehearsal director type role in rehearsals did not diminish my contributions as a choreographer; it was simply one more way in which I brought my critical eye and artistic vision to the project. My strength lies in augmenting and editing parts that are already present. The initial creation was more challenging for me, but once we had a skeleton, I was hungry to analyze, make changes, and add material to the piece. Of course these generalizations do not mean that Quentin ignored the logistics and details or that I never inspired a section or looked at the big picture; these simplified statements are our general tendencies, and they worked to our advantage once we started choreographing together.

Instead of sensing that I learned definitive aspects about myself during this process, I found that I am a more flexible art maker than I formerly believed. I allowed myself to become a chameleon to the needs of the piece and my collaborator. I co-choreographed and created video for several sections that had different moods and choreographic structures. Each section was a new exercise in figuring out the function of the section within the larger structure. I also allowed myself to coach in a new way. After my last choreographic endeavor, I promised myself that I would give my dancers only physical cues instead of emotional directives because I thought that pure physicality was the key to creating emotion and meaning. In "Staring at the Sun," the videos and different movement sections made a non-linear story appear, so each dancer's identity,

presence, and relationships became very important. We coached the dancers' intention by answering and/or asking them questions about who they are and who they have relationships with in the piece. If I could go back and start the piece over, I would go even further in coaching emotion and motivation. Identities appeared as a result of the choreographic choices, but what could have happened if we prescribed characters before we choreographed? I would not have wanted the piece to turn into a literal narrative plot with a clear cast of trope characters, but it would have been an exciting opportunity for movement to stem from each character's traits and relationships with the other characters. Although it could have gone further, this step in a new direction was monumental for me. I feel excited and empowered that instead of making a piece that solidifies what I know I can do, I reinforced some of my strengths while allowing myself to serve the project's needs. My ability to accept and initiate change should serve me well as I look forward to working with different artists as a freelance performer and collaborator.

Although this piece has seen its last performance, its influence on my life as an artist will continue. The piece was made specifically for a certain group of dancers in the EMMA Lab, so I would not want to try to recreate the piece in its same form once we go our separate ways. Certain sections of movement may eventually find their way into Quentin's or my future choreographic endeavors, and we could make a few great dance films from all the footage that we gathered, but as a unit, the piece is finished. The continual self discovery about what appeals to me in choreography and how I work as a collaborator will help me in the future as I choose which projects interest me and how I would like to be involved in them. The concluding performance was a proud moment, but the hours spent in thought, conversation, video editing, and in the studio taught us the deepest lessons of our project.

This project, "Video and Live Dance in Symbiosis," was funded by an Undergraduate Research Scholarship from The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences.